THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Art of Losing Your Life

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I am for going on, and venturing my eternal state with Christ, whether I have comfort here or no; if God doth not come in, thought I, I will leap off the ladder even blindfold into Eternitie, sink or swim, come heaven, come hell; Lord Jesus, if thou wilt catch me, do; if not, I will venture for thy name.

John Bunyan

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THE ART OF LOSING YOUR LIFE

"For those who want to save their life will lose it... For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Mark 8:35, 36

We sustained and grieved the loss of prominent people this month: Princess Diana, Mother Teresa; music lovers and Chicagoans mourned the passing of Sir George Solti; baseball lovers, at least of my age, mourned the untimely death of Richie Ashburn, a fine center fielder for the Philadelphia Phillies and my childhood idol.

Eclipsed by their celebrity, however, was one of the giants of the twentieth century, a very imortant thinker and teacher, Viktor Frankl, who died at the age of 92. He was one of the last of the great Vienna psychiatrists. His *New York Times* obituary told the remarkable story of his life and how he influenced the thought of the 20th century in psychology, medicine and religion. His classic, *Man's Search for Meaning*, was required reading for many of us in college.

Viktor Frankl's thoughts were shaped by his experience as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz and Dachau. He and his entire family were arrested in 1942 in a general round-up of Jews in Vienna. His new bride had sown the manuscript of a new book he was writing into the lining of his coat in preparation for the arrest and deposition they knew was coming. (The manuscript was lost in the camp when prisoners were stripped and clothing confiscated. He recreated it painstakingly at Auschwitz, on scraps of contraband paper and it became, in 1946, *Man's Search for Meaning*.)

After their arrival at Auschwitz, the Frankl family – his father, mother, brother and pregnant wife – were put in a shed with 1,500 others, made to squat on the bare ground and given one four-ounce piece of bread to last them four days. That day, Frankl was separated from his family, all of whom died in the camps. He never saw them again.

Frankl continued to observe and to think and write about what he was seeing at Auschwitz, particularly the human psychological dynamics among his fellow prisoners. One of the phenomenon he observed was "once prisoners were entrenched in camp routine, they would descend from a denial of their situation into a stage of apathy and the beginning of a kind of emotional death" ... "as their illusions dropped away and their hopes were crushed, they would watch others die without experiencing any emotion, and then descend into a disabling, paralyzing depression." As it became clear to them that they were not going to get out, all meaning, all purpose, all energy, certainly all love or caring declined and then disappeared and life became a simple matter of waiting for death.

As Frankl began to experience it himself, he realized that the only possible meaning his life could have in Auschwitz was as he reached out to help others. Prisoners were beginning to commit suicide. It was against the rules to do anything to prevent it from happening. So Frankl began to do what he could to convince his fellow prisoners to reach out to each other: to talk to one another about their children, parents, regardless of how painful, to replay memories, to take imaginary snapshots of sunsets and

mountains and to tell one another about the imaginary photographs, to do whatever was necessary to sustain life, spirit, energy, will, in one another, and always, always to share meager scraps of bread.

And through it all, Frankl experienced an amazing truth, namely that the more an individual began to help others, the less depressed he was. The more an individual gave, the healthier she became. The more an individual lived for something other than survival, the more likely he/she was to survive. The more an individual gave away of his or her meager life, the more – strength, stamina, health, will to live – he/she gained.

One time, centuries before, a young man, a Jew about 30 years old, said,

> "if any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

And he said,

> "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

And he asked,

> "What will it profit for them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

It is a very critical part of the story of Jesus, a turning point. His small band of friends had been following him through the villages and towns of Galilee, occasionally crossing back and forth by fishing vessel over the lake. He taught in synagogues, healed the sick, received, welcomed, ate with, celebrated the life of all sorts of people, many of whom were on the margins of society. He touched the untouchables, he broke bread with the unclean, he welcomed the nobodies – the weak, the sick, the mentally disturbed, the little children.

One day he asked them what people were saying about him, who people said he was. And they told him, "people think you are John the Baptist. Some think you are a prophet." And then he asked who they thought he was. What a moment! There is no indication that they had thought much about it. He was Jesus, from Nazareth, carpenter, rabbi. So it is a moment when his closest friend, Peter, says, "You are the Messiah – the promised deliverer, the redeemer, the savior, the Christ."

And it is an even more amazing moment when Jesus allows that statement to stand and then says, "yes, and because that is true, there is suffering and loss and death ahead."

Peter, his friend, continues to speak for the rest of them, for all of us, actually. He says what I would say in the situation. "God forbid! What in the world are you talking about, man. Saviors don't suffer. Christ doesn't die. Don't be silly. If you have the power of God in you, no one can lay a finger on you. Scribes, Pharisees, priests, politicians – toast!" That's what I'd say, wouldn't you?

Jesus is harsh with Peter for saying what you and I would have said under the circumstances. Uncompromisingly hard. "Get behind me, Satan." This is a very critical matter, at the heart of who he is and what he means to say. And then he turns to the crowd of people who are tagging along, waiting to see him, waiting, not too patiently, for a touch of his hand, a word of encouragement, a healing. They have come to get something from him and there's nothing wrong with that, particularly when your needs are so urgent; when you're poor or blind or crippled or depressed or out of luck, and so it is unusual, dramatic, when he turns to the crowd and says, "You want to follow me – deny yourself – take up a cross. Save your life and lose it. Lose your life for my sake and save it."

That's not a euphemism, by the way, that "take up your cross." The Romans crucified insurrectionists, political activists, trouble makers: arrested and executed them just like tyrants always have. Just like the Nazis executed Jews. Just like the Argentines "disappeared" 30,000 of their own children, young people who objected to the oppression of the dictator. Chad Myers, New Testament scholar, says, "Take up your cross" may even have been a recruiting slogan for the zealots, a guerrilla organization that harassed the Romans … and who were routinely arrested, forced to carry their crosses and crucified, starting with Peter.

Religion always has trouble with this kind of talk. Kenneth Carter, Methodist Bishop from Nashville, writes: "Should not religion first protect us from suffering, bring security, give us victory? This is no way to gain followers. Personal suffering, heavy crosses, losing one's life – that will not sell. That will not bring church growth." [*Christian Century*, 8-27 - 9/3, 1997]

It's a marketing nightmare. How do you pitch a religion that asks you to give your life away? In a fine new book, *Reforming Protestantism*, Professor Douglas Ottati of Union Seminary in Virginia, says that the major competitors to this basic Christian message are not just in the culture which keeps insisting that the purpose of human life ought to be to stay as far away as possible from self denial, voluntary suffering. They come also from within ~~just like Peter's objectivism~~ – one he calls "Redundantly Therapeutic Spirituality," feel-good religion, whose purpose is to enhance everybody's self-esteem. Another he calls "Evangelical Moralism," which defines religion as the effort to restore spiritual righteousness to society. If we can just tighten up the rules a little bit, make sure that sinners don't get away with anything – like ordination – and get prayer back in the public schools – all will be well – again.

The trouble is Jesus didn't say anything like that. He did, by the way, provide the only basis I know of for self-esteem by affirming God's love for each of us, regardless of who we are, and by personally reaching across the barriers and exclusivism of his own culture and religion to embrace and include the outsiders. And he did condemn sin and expect righteousness although, to the great consternation of the evangelical moralists, he was far more concerned about economic sin and greed and injustice – about which he had a lot to say – than about sexual sin, about which he had very little to say. Nothing – in fact, not a word – about the favorite topic of the evangelical moralists. What he did say, clearly, is that to follow him means to learn how to give life away.

He did say, with laser-like sharpness, that if you want to live your life fully, which is a very legitimate aspiration, you have to learn to die a little or a lot. He did say, and I wonder if he didn't somehow know you and I and the rest of the Christian world would be listening into this conversation at the end

of the 20th century – he did say that you could gain the whole world and lose your life – which means your psyche – your spirit – that which is most alive in you – most holy – your own soul.

The more I have thought about this (and how can you be an American Christian in the 20th Century, living when and how you live, and not think a lot about this?) the more I think about it the more I conclude that Jesus is here saying something that we already in some way know to be true. Someone told me that the essence of teaching is enabling a student to acknowledge and own and have words to name what he or she already knows to be true. So deep in your heart I think you already know that if you want to live you have to give your life away.

William Rasberry wondered in an editorial last week, about the "great disconnect" of the late 1990s – between the soaring stock market and the economically anxious American middle class. "What gives?" Rasberry asks. We ought to be ecstatic. We – most of us – are doing very well. Income is up. Interest is steady. Unemployment is down. We're talking seriously, for the first time in a long time, about reduced deficits, balanced budgets. But there are plenty of economic and other indicators pointing in the direction of general dis-ease, anxiety. Rasberry took his question to an economist and futurist, Robert Theobald, who is about to publish a new book with an interesting title, *Remaking Success.* Theobald says most people have not, in fact, bought in, intellectually or spiritually, to the current reigning market dogma of maximum economic growth, maximum productivity, maximum profit without regard to the impact on the world's resources or the human psyche or human families, human communities. What we want, Theobald says, is ultimately not higher and higher income, more and more comfort, what we most want is "higher quality of life, healthier relationships and a more compassionate society." [*Chicago Tribune*, 9-16-97]

Theobald suggests, and I think he's right, that it takes a major event, a crisis, to reveal the "chasm," the spiritual disconnect between the life we live and the truth we know in our souls. I believe that is what the massive response to the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa was about. The common theme was compassion. The Princess and Mother Teresa cared, took into their own souls the pain and suffering of others. Princess Diana did what few if any did, not only royalty, reached out and touched persons with AIDS at a time when no one was doing that; held in her arms an infant with AIDS at a time when we weren't convinced that was safe to do. And Mother Teresa focused on the poorest of the poor, the wretched, dying homeless of Calcutta – literally the untouchables. And both of them touched, in the process, a place in our hearts where, regardless of our opinions about the relevance of the House of Windsor, or Mother Teresa's stand on abortion – whether we are Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Moslem or nothing – we know the truth that what matters most in this life is not how much you earn or own, but the quality of your relationships, the degree of your caring, the passion of your devotion.

Jesuit missionaries to the Iroquois Indians in the 17th century reported their fascination with Iroquois belief that "some diseases result from the resentment of a soul whose desires are not being met." But, they observed, these desires are not the usual, human desires for comfort, health, wealth – these are "soul desires": "they dwell deep within our hearts and reveal themselves through dreams. When those desires are denied – the Iroquois say the soul revolts against the body causing diseases, even death." [*Daybook*, April 28, 1997, "The Alchemy of Illness," Kat Duff, p. 73]

There is wisdom here: truth which I think we know in our hearts. But … how to do it. How to get from a truth in our hearts to an experience. How exactly to take up your cross and deny yourself and give your life away.

Viktor Frankl was able to do it – in his concentration camp experience. Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew in his heart what he was called to do. Martin Luther King poured out his life for people he loved. But how about you and me, doing the best we can to keep body and soul together, pay our bills, live out our commitments with integrity and compassion.

Douglas Ottati describes it as a decision we all make: to live for Jesus Christ or to live for ourselves. "It is," he says, "a manner of living, reordered and reformed by a radical devotion to God and God's transformative purpose in Jesus Christ."

> "At stake here," he writes, "in denying oneself, in taking up one's cross, in following Jesus, and in losing one's life in order to find it – is an abiding and orienting dominant devotion." [p. 57]

We are not all called to dramatic martyrdom. But each of us does choose every day how to live, for whom to live.

One of the most helpful passages I have ever read about this matter of denying self and giving life away and taking up a cross was by Lamar Williamson,

> "The woman who devotes her life to raising children in need of a home, the man whose devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady, the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience sake leads to prison or exile – these are the countless thousands who, through the centuries and in many contexts, have interpreted this text in their lives."
> [*Interpretations*, March]

And so I invite you this morning to know the truth – that losing life for the sake of Jesus Christ is gaining life, that giving yourself away to those who need you, your love, your strength, your compassion, to causes and organizations that depend on you: to your spouse, partner, parents, children, to Jesus Christ, is to be truly and authentically alive. I invite you to know it and to do it, to develop and to practice the art of losing your life. Amen.

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Dear God, we spend so much of our time and energy, so much of our lives, getting and earning and striving and climbing and counting at the end of the day what we have. Help us to give. Give us grace and courage to lose – and in that giving of our selves, to be alive – in you – through Jesus Christ our Lord.